

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1 1. An apparatus to make a certain volume of liquid available for
2 atomization, the apparatus comprising:
3 a container adapted to hold a liquid; and
4 a piston pump comprising a piston member and a valve body, wherein the
5 piston member is slidable within the valve body, and wherein the valve body functions with
6 the piston member to define a metering chamber, wherein the metering chamber is adapted to
7 be filled with liquid from the container when the piston member is moved to a filling
8 position, and wherein the piston pump is adapted to dispense a known volume of the liquid
9 from the metering chamber when the piston member is moved to a dispensing position.

1 2. An apparatus as in claim 1, further comprising a biasing member
2 disposed between the container and the piston member to bias the piston member in the
3 direction of the dispensing position and to require a force to be placed on the piston member
4 to move the piston member to the filling position.

1 3. An apparatus as in claim 2, wherein the piston member has a proximal
2 end and a distal end, wherein the piston pump further comprises a tubular valve seat slidably
3 disposed about the distal end of the piston member such that the liquid within the metering
4 chamber moves the tubular valve seat distally over the piston member to allow the liquid in
5 the metering chamber to be dispensed by flowing between the piston member and the tubular
6 valve seat when the piston member is moved toward the dispensing position.

1 4. An apparatus as in claim 3, wherein the tubular valve seat is slidable
2 within the valve body, wherein the valve body defines a stop to stop distal movement of the
3 tubular valve seat relative to the piston member, and wherein the biasing member forces the
4 distal end of the piston member into a distal end of the tubular valve seat to provide a seal
5 between the piston member and the tubular valve seat.

1 5. An apparatus as in claim 4, wherein the proximal end of the piston
2 member includes a resilient frontal end that contacts the valve body.

1 6. An apparatus as in claim 5, wherein a proximal portion of the valve
2 body includes a set of crenellations that provide fluid passageways to the liquid in the
3 container, and wherein the resilient frontal end is moved over the crenellations when in the

4 filling position, and wherein a vacuum is created within the metering chamber while the
5 piston member is being moved to the filling position such that liquid within the container is
6 drawn into the metering chamber when the piston member is at the filling position.

1 7. An apparatus as in claim 6, wherein the valve body includes an
2 expansion region distal to the crenellations, wherein the distance between the expansion
3 region and the crenellations defines a valve stroke where the vacuum is created in the
4 metering chamber during movement to the filling position, and wherein the volume of the
5 liquid dispensed is determined based on the stroke.

1 8. An apparatus as in claim 4, wherein the distal end of the piston
2 member has a rounded surface, and wherein the distal end of the tubular valve seat includes a
3 conical portion to mate with the distal end of the piston member and to provide a line seal
4 when received into the rounded portion.

1 9. An apparatus as in claim 8, wherein the tubular valve seat further
2 includes a buffer channel that extends distally from the rounded portion to prevent
3 contaminated liquid from passing back up into the container.

1 10. An apparatus as in claim 1, further comprising a tube piston slidably
2 disposed within the container, wherein the tube piston slides toward the piston pump as liquid
3 is drawn out of the container and into the metering chamber.

1 11. An apparatus as in claim 1, wherein the metering chamber defines a
2 volume in the range from about 10 microliters to about 150 microliters.

1 12. An apparatus for nebulizing a liquid, the apparatus comprising:
2 a housing;

3 a vibratable member disposed within the housing, the vibratable member
4 comprising a front surface, a rear surface, and a plurality of apertures extending
5 therebetween;

6 a liquid supplier disposed within the housing which is adapted to deliver a
7 certain volume of liquid to the rear surface; and

8 a vibrator which vibrates the vibratable member to eject liquid droplets from
9 the front surface of the vibratable member;

10 wherein the liquid supplier comprises a container adapted to hold a liquid, and

11 a piston pump comprising a piston member and a valve body which function together to
12 define a metering chamber, wherein the metering chamber is adapted to be filled with liquid
13 from the container when the piston member is moved within the valve body to a filling
14 position, and wherein the piston pump is adapted to dispense a known volume of the liquid
15 from the metering chamber when the piston member is moved to a dispensing position.

1 13. An apparatus as in claim 12, wherein the piston member has a distal
2 end which is disposed in the vicinity of the rear surface of the vibratable member.

1 14. An apparatus as in claim 12, wherein the apertures are tapered to
2 narrow from the rear surface to the front surface.

1 15. An apparatus as in claim 12, further comprising a tube piston slidably
2 disposed within the container, wherein the tube piston slides toward the piston pump as liquid
3 is drawn out of the container and into the metering chamber.

1 16. An apparatus as in claim 12, wherein the piston member has a
2 proximal end and a distal end, wherein the piston pump further comprises a tubular valve seat
3 slidably disposed about the distal end of the piston member such that the liquid within the
4 metering chamber moves the tubular valve seat distally over the piston member to allow the
5 liquid in the metering chamber to be dispensed by flowing between the piston member and
6 the tubular valve seat when the piston member is moved toward the dispensing position,
7 wherein the distal end of the piston member has a rounded surface, and wherein the distal end
8 of the tubular valve seat includes a conical portion to contact the distal end of the piston
9 member and to provide a line seal when received into the rounded portion.

1 17. A method to make a certain volume of liquid available for atomization,
2 the method comprising:
3 drawing liquid from a container into a metering chamber with a vacuum to fill
4 the metering chamber with liquid; and
5 dispensing a known volume of the liquid from the metering chamber such that
6 a known volume of the liquid is available for atomization.

1 18. A method as in claim 17, further comprising providing a piston pump
2 to draw the liquid from the container, wherein the piston pump includes a piston member that

3 is slidable within a valve body, and wherein the piston member and the valve body function
4 to define the metering chamber.

1 19. A method as in claim 18, further comprising moving the piston
2 member to a filling position to fill the metering chamber with liquid, and moving the piston
3 member to a dispensing position to dispense the liquid from the metering chamber.

1 20. A method as in claim 19, further comprising biasing the piston member
2 in the direction of the dispensing position to require a force to be placed on the piston
3 member to move the piston member to the filling position.

1 21. A method as in claim 20, wherein the valve body operably connected
2 to the container and includes crenellations that provide fluid passageways to the container,
3 wherein the piston member is slidable within the valve body, and further comprising sliding
4 the piston member to the filling position where liquid flows through the crenellations to fill
5 the metering chamber.

1 22. A method as in claim 21, wherein the piston member has a proximal
2 end and a distal end, wherein the piston pump further comprises a tubular valve seat slidably
3 disposed about the distal end of the piston member such that when the piston member is
4 biased in the direction of the dispensing position, the liquid within the metering chamber
5 moves the tubular valve seat distally over the piston member to allow the liquid in the
6 metering chamber to be dispensed by flowing between the piston member and the tubular
7 valve seat.

1 23. A method in claim 22, wherein the tubular valve seat is slidable within
2 the valve body, and further comprising stopping distal movement of the tubular valve seat
3 relative to the piston member with a stop on the valve body after the known volume of the
4 liquid has been dispensed from the metering chamber.

1 24. A method as in claim 22, wherein the distal end of the piston member
2 has a rounded surface, and wherein biasing of the piston member forces the distal end of the
3 piston member into a conical portion within the tubular valve seat to provide a line seal
4 between the piston member and the tubular valve seat.

1 25. A method as in claim 24, wherein the valve seat includes a buffer
2 channel distal to the conical portion, and further comprising permitting undispensed liquid to
3 collect in the buffer channel.

1 26. A method as in claim 21, wherein the proximal end of the piston
2 member includes a resilient frontal end to contact the proximal end of the piston member
3 against the valve body, and further comprising proximally moving the resilient front end to
4 create the vacuum within the metering chamber so that when the piston member reaches the
5 filling position, liquid within the container is drawn into the metering chamber.

1 27. A method as in claim 26, wherein the valve body further includes an
2 expansion region distal to the crenellations, and further comprising moving the resilient
3 frontal end a full stroke from the crenellations to the expansion region to dispense the known
4 volume.

1 28. A method as in claim 27, further comprising varying the distance
2 between the expansion region and the crenellations to change the volume dispensed.

1 29. A method as in claim 17, wherein the container includes a tube piston
2 that is slidably disposed within the container, and further comprising permitting the tube
3 piston to slide toward the tubular valve seat as liquid is drawn out of the container and into
4 the metering chamber.

1 30. A method as in claim 17, wherein the known volume of dispensed
2 liquid is in the range from about 10 microliters to about 150 microliters.